

# On Anonymity

Asma and Taylor

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As I have mentioned before, Asma is not my collaborator's real name. This episode will explain our process behind deciding on anonymity. First, however, I would like to share Asma's initial thoughts on changing her name:

A: *I remember one thing you tell me.*

T: *Yeah.*

A: *You tell me, whether you like it's gonna be public, whether you like it's gonna be...*

T: *Mhm.*

A: *We can only share the friend...*

T: *Mhm.*

A: *Or you like it's can be only my project?*

T: *Yeah.*

A: *Yeah. I'm kind of like, feeling a little bit shy...*

T: *Okay.*

A: *I, I didn't like the idea for the public.*

T: *Okay.*

A: *But you can share it with the friends...*

T: *Okay.*

A: *Yeah, with the teachers if we like.*

T: *Okay.*

A: *But feeling in public, that's like, "Oh. I don't wanna be everybody know me..." [laughs as she speaks]. Like...*

T: *Okay. What we can do, too, is—I-I just want you to know, we can always change your name.*

A: *Oh!*

T: *So people wouldn't have to know it's—people wouldn't have to know it's you.*

A: *Yeah!*

T: *Um, the other thing is, is that we could make the whole project, and you could decide that only part of it wants to be public, and we could only—we could have—not everything has to be shared.*

A: *It's a good idea to change the names.*

funny  
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asking  
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T: Yeah, so like just... Yeah. Change the names. And we can use just small parts that you wanna share. So that, like, you're not sharing your whole story, you're—you're sharing your whole story, but you don't have to—

A: Nobody can know you if you change your name!

T: They don't have to know it's you.

A: There's a lot of refugees, hundreds, thousands, yeah.

T: So if you don't want your story specifically about you, if you just want parts of it published, we could do the whole project and you could say, "I only want these five minutes, but I could share that with the whole world." And we could do that.

yes.

A: Yeah.

T: We could do that.

A: It's a good idea. I love it.

T: All right.

A: I love it, that. I love it that.

The relief is palpable in Asma's voice when I expressed that possibility to her. Changing her name and reiterating her control over what and how she wants to share her story is something we returned to throughout our conversations, and I am glad we did.

Part of me wonders if changing the names removes a sense of humanity from the work. In silencing her "true" identity, have we created one of Heath Cabot's ethnographic "ghosts?" I have come to the conclusion that asking that question puts too much power in a single word as representative of an entire narrative, and it is in the act of storytelling that we get as close as we can to the "truth." To paraphrase Shakespeare, it doesn't matter that the rose is called a rose, but that it exists, in all its beauty and thorns.

Before I stray too far into metaphor, however, let's return to Asma. We eventually settled on using our conversations as the source material to tell her story, but we would change the names in the transcripts and mute them in the recordings.

A: So I like it to use the voice.

T: Yeah.

A: But I would like to change my name.

T: Okay.

A: Yeah. Yeah.

T: We can change your name.

A: Yeah.

T: Here wait, let me write that down right now, so that we know.

A: Yeah. I don't want people know, know me every time they [??] [laughs]

T: Okay, we can do that!

A: These days the computer is interested, internet is interested, so people can know you like that.  
[snaps]

That final line addresses the fragility of identity and anonymity. As Asma says, "The internet is interested," and people with the right sense of determination could try to dismantle that anonymity. As Murphy and Dingwall write, ethnographers "are rarely able to give *absolute* guarantees that the identities of people and places will remain hidden," and "participants and informants will remain identifiable to themselves" (2001: 341).

Sharing this story with a broader audience makes that guarantee of anonymity even harder. There is a possibility that someone could identify her. However, removing as many names, dates, and locations as possible should provide Asma with some confidence in our confidentiality.

The shyness persisted, though, as we neared the end of our final planning conversation and I decided to make sure we agreed on how public the project would be.

T: Also... Would you like... Me to...

A: Hm?

T: *Would you want this to be something that people, everywhere around the world can access?*  
[A sighs] *If we change your names.*

*no broken*

A: No, I don't know that.

T: No?

A: I mean, I mean... Mm. I don't know. [chuckles]

T: Yeah.

A: I never put a story there.

T: Yeah?

A: So, what...


T: Take-take some time to think about it.

A: Yeah. Yeah. Sometime I say, "If I change my name, why do I hide it?"

T: *Why would you hide your name?*

A: Yeah—No, if I, if I hide my name, why do I hide the story?

T: Right.

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A: And so—If I change my name, why do I hide the story?

T: Right.

A: And I say, "The reason I am changing is to..."

T: To share it.

A: "To anyone know, know me."

T: Okay.

A: So, um, yeah, I can share.

T: Okay.

A: A lot of people share their story, and I read them, and I...

T: Okay.

A: I have the experience for that.

T: Yeah.

A: And, and I love some stories, but I don't know what the reality are, right?

T: Right.

A: But the story, I, the way I give you, I mean, I—it's not important to me. You know me, I don't want the public know me. [chuckles]

T: Yeah, we can change...

A: Yeah, we can change the name, but yeah, you can let the story free. [laughs]

T: Okay. Awesome!

"You can let the story free." This statement is a powerful one. It feels like a letting-go, a release of control over the narrative on Asma's and my part. And perhaps it is. After a certain point, the agency we both have over this story ends when it enters the ears of the listeners. The story—as well as my analysis—is in your hands now. It is a brave act, letting these things go. And it—we—request the same amount of courage and vulnerability on your part as you absorb these words and learn what you will from them.

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